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THE MAN BEETHOVEN : AN ESTIMATE OF HIS CHARACTER

By ALEXANDER W. THAYER

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THE year 1800 is an important era in Beethoven's history. It is the year in which, cutting loose from the pianoforte, he asserted his claims to a position with Mozart and the still living and productive Haydn in the higher forms of chamber and orchestral composition—the quartet and the symphony. It is the year, too, in which the bitter consciousness of an increasing derangement of his organs of hearing was forced upon him and the terrible anticipation of its incurable nature and of its final result in almost total deafness began to harass and distress him. The course of his life was afterwards so modified, on the one hand, by the prosperous issue of these new appeals to the taste and judgment of the public, and, on the other, by the unhappy progress of his malady, each acting and reacting upon a nature singularly exceptional, that for this and other reasons some points in his personal character and habits, and a few general remarks upon and illustrations of another topic or two, must be made before resuming the narrative of events.

A true and exhaustive picture of Beethoven as a man would present an almost ludicrous contrast to that which is generally entertained as correct. As sculptors and painters have each in turn idealized the work of his predecessor, until the composer stands before us like a Homeric god—until those who knew him personally, could they return to earth, would never suspect that the grand form and noble features of the more pretentious portraits are intended to represent the short muscular figure and pock-pitted face of their old friend—so in literature evoked by the composer a similar process has gone on, with a corresponding suppression of whatever is deemed common and trivial, until he is made a being living in his own peculiar realm of gigantic ideas, above and apart from the rest of mankind—a sort of intellectual Thor, dwelling in "darkness and clouds of awful state," and making



LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

After the Bust by Franz Klein

1812

ADAMS & GRACE COMPANY N.Y.

in his music mysterious revelations of things unutterable! But it is really some generations too soon for a conscientious investigator of his history to view him as a semi-mythological personage, or to discover that his notes to friends asking for pens, making appointments to dinner at taverns, or complaining of servants, are "cyclopean blocks of granite," which, like the "chops and tomato sauce" of Mr. Pickwick, contain depths unfathomable of profound meaning. The present age must be content to find in Beethoven, with all his greatness, a very human nature, one which, if it showed extraordinary strength, exhibited also extraordinary weaknesses.

It was the great misfortune of Beethoven's youth—his impulses good and bad being by nature exceedingly quick and violent—that he did not grow up under the influence of a wise and strict parental control, which would have given him those habits of self-restraint that, once fixed, are a second and better nature, and through which the passions, curbed and moderated, remain only as sources of noble energy and power. His very early admission into the orchestra of the theatre as cembalist, was more to the advantage of his musical than of his moral development. It was another misfortune that, in those years, when the strict regulations of a school would have compensated in some measure for the unwise, unsteady, often harsh discipline of his father, he was thus thrown into close connection with actors and actresses, who, in those days, were not very distinguished for the propriety of their manners and morals. Before his seventeenth or eighteenth year, when he became known to the Breuning family and Count Waldstein, he could hardly have learned the importance of cultivating those high principles of life and conduct on which in later years he laid so much stress. And, at that period of life, the character even under ordinary circumstances is so far developed, the habits have become so far formed and fixed, and the natural tendencies have acquired so much strength, that it is, as a rule, too late to conquer the power of a perfect self-command. At all events, the consequences of a deficient early moral education followed Beethoven through life and are visible in the frequent contests between his worse and his better nature and in his constant tendency to extremes. To-day, upon some perhaps trivial matter, he bursts into ungovernable wrath; to-morrow, his penitence exceeds the measure of his fault. To-day he is proud, unbending, offensively careless of those claims which society grants to people of high rank; to-morrow his humility is more than adequate to the occasion. The poverty in which he grew up was not without

its effect upon his character. He never learned to estimate money at its real value; though often profuse and generous to a fault, even wasteful, yet at times he would fall into the other extreme. With all his sense of nobility of independence, he early formed the habit of leaning upon others; and this the more, as his malady increased, which certainly was a partial justification; but he thus became prone to follow unwise counsels, or, when his pride was touched, to assert an equally unwise independence. At other times, in the multitude of counsellors he became the victim of utter irresolution, when decision and firmness were indispensable and essential to his welfare. Thus, both by following the impulse of the moment, and by hesitation when a prompt determination was demanded, he took many a false step, which could no longer be retrieved when reflection brought with it bitter regret.

It would be doing great injustice both to Beethoven and to the present writer to understand the preceding remarks as being intended to represent the composer's lapses in these regards, as being more than unpleasant and unfortunate episodes in the general tenor of his life; but as they did occur to his great disadvantage, the fact cannot be silently passed over.

A romantically sentimental admiration of the heroes of ancient classic literature, having its origin in Paris, had become widely the fashion in Beethoven's youth. The democratic theories of the French sentimentalists had received a new impulse from the dignified simplicity of the foreign representatives of the young American Republic, Franklin, Adams, Jay—from the retirement to private life on their plantations and farms of the great military leaders in the contest, Washington, Greene, Schuyler, Knox and others, after the war with England was over; from the pride taken by the French officers, who had served in America, in their insignia of the order of the Cincinnati; and even from the letters and journals of German officers, who, in captivity, had formed friendships with many of the better class of the republican leaders, and seen with their own eyes in what simplicity they lived while guiding the destinies of the new-born nation. Thus through the greater part of Central Europe the idea became current of a pure and sublime humanity, above and beyond the influence of the passions, of which Cincinnatus, Scipio, Cato, Washington, Franklin, were the supposed representatives. Zschokke makes his Heuven say: "Virtue and the heroes of antiquity had inspired me with enthusiasm for virtue and heroism"; and so, also, Beethoven. He exalted his imagination and fancy by the perusal

of the German poets and translations of the ancient and English classics, especially Homer, Plutarch and Shakespeare; dwelt fondly upon the great characters as models for the conduct of life; but between the sentiment which one feels and the active principle on which he acts, there is often a wide cleft. That Beethoven proved to be no Stoic, that he never succeeded in governing his passions with absolute sway, was not because the spirit was unwilling; the flesh was weak. Adequate firmness of character had not been acquired in early years. But those who have most thoroughly studied his life, know best how pure and lofty were his aspirations, how wide and deep his sympathies with all that is good, how great his heart, how, on the whole, heroic his endurance of his great calamity. They can best feel the man's true greatness, admire the nobility of his nature, and drop the tear of sorrow and regret upon his vagaries and faults. He who is morbidly sensitive, and compelled to keep constant ward and watch over his passions, can best appreciate and sympathize with the man, Beethoven.

Truth and candor compel the confession, that in those days of prosperity he bore his honors with less of meekness than we could wish; that he had lost something of that modesty and ingenuousness eulogized by Junker ten years before, in his Mergentheim letter. His "somewhat lofty bearing" had even been reported by the correspondent of the "*Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*." Traces of self-sufficiency and even arrogance—faults almost universal among young and successful geniuses, often in a far higher degree than was true of Beethoven, and with not a tithe of his reason—are unquestionably visible. No one can read without regret his remarks upon certain persons not named, with whom at this very time he was upon terms of apparently intimate friendship. "I value them," he writes, "only by what they do for me. . . . I look upon them only as instruments upon which I play when I feel so disposed." His "somewhat lofty bearing" was matter for jest to the venerable Haydn, who, according to a trustworthy tradition, when Beethoven's visits to him had become few and far between would inquire of other visitors: "How goes it with our Great Mogul?" Nor would the young nobles, whose society he frequented, take offence; but it certainly made him enemies among those whom he "valued according to their service and looked upon as mere instruments"—and no wonder!

Pierson, in his edition of the so-called "Beethoven's Studien," has added to Seyfried's personal sketches a few reminiscences

of that Griesinger, who was so long Saxon Minister in Vienna, and to whom we owe the valuable "Biographische Notizen über Joseph Haydn." One of his anecdotes is to the purpose here and may be taken as substantially historical.

When he was still only an attaché, and Beethoven was little known except as a celebrated pianoforte player, both being still young, they happened to meet at the house of Prince Lobkowitz. In conversation with a gentleman present, Beethoven said in substance, that he wished to be relieved from all bargain and sale of his works, and would gladly find some one willing to pay him a certain income for life, for which he should possess the exclusive right of publishing all he wrote; adding, "and I would not be idle in composition. I believe Goethe does this with Cotta, and, if I mistake not, Handel's London publisher held similar terms with him."

"My dear young man," returned the other, "You must not complain; for you are neither a Goethe nor a Handel, and it is not to be expected that you ever will be; for such masters will not be born again." Beethoven bit his lips, gave a most contemptuous glance at the speaker, and said no more. Lobkowitz endeavored to appease him, and in a subsequent conversation said:

"My dear Beethoven, the gentleman did not intend to wound you. It is an established maxim, to which most men adhere, that the present generation cannot possibly produce such mighty spirits as the dead, who have already earned their fame."

"So much the worse, Your Highness," retorted Beethoven; "but with men who will not believe and trust in me because I am as yet unknown to universal fame, I cannot hold intercourse!"

It is easy for this generation, which has the productions of the composer's whole life as the basis of its judgment of his powers, to speak disparagingly of his contemporaries for not being able to discover in his first twelve or fifteen works good reason for classing him with Goethe and Handel; but he who stands upon a mountain cannot justly ridicule him on the plain for the narrow extent of his view. It was as difficult then to conceive the possibility of instrumental music being elevated to heights greater than those reached by Haydn and Mozart, as it is for us to conceive of Beethoven being hereafter surpassed.

In the short personal sketches of Beethoven's friends which have been introduced, the dates of their births have been noted so far as known, that the reader may observe how very large a proportion of them were of the same age as the composer, or still

younger—some indeed but boys—when he came to Vienna. And so it continued. As the years pass by in our narrative and names familiar to us disappear, the new ones which take their places, with rare exceptions, are still of men much younger than himself. The older generation of musical amateurs at Vienna, van Swieten and his class, had accepted the young Bonn organist and patronized him, as a pianist. But when Beethoven began to press his claims as a composer, and, somewhat later, as his deafness increased, to neglect his playing, some of the elder friends had passed away, others had withdrawn from society, and the number was few of those who, like Lichnowsky, could comprehend that departures from the forms and styles of Mozart and Haydn were not necessarily faults. With the greater number, as perfection necessarily admits of no improvement and both quartet and symphony in *form* had been carried to that point by Haydn and Mozart, it was a perfectly logical conclusion that farther progress was impossible. They could not perceive that there was still room for the invention or discovery of new elements of interest, beauty, power; for such perceptions are the offspring of genius. With Beethoven they were instinctive.

One more remark: Towards the decline of life, the masterpieces of literature and art, on which the taste was formed, are apt to become invested in the mind with a sort of nimbus of sanctity; hence, the productions of a young and daring innovator, even when the genius and talent displayed in them are felt and receive just acknowledgement, have the aspect, not only of an extravagant and erring waste of misapplied powers, but of a kind of profane audacity. For these and similar reasons Beethoven's novelties found little favor with the veterans of the concert-room.

The criticism of the day was naturally ruled and stimulated by the same spirit. Beethoven's own confession how it at first wounded him, will come in its order; but after he felt that his victory over it was sure—was in fact gained with a younger generation—he only laughed at the critics; to answer them, except by new works, was beneath him. Seyfried says of him (during the years of the "Eroica," "Fidelio," etc.): "When he came across criticisms in which he was accused of grammatical errors he rubbed his hands in glee and cried out with a loud laugh: 'Yes, yes! they marvel and put their heads together because they do not find it in any school of thoroughbass!'" But for the young of both sexes, Beethoven's music had an extraordinary charm. And this not upon technical grounds, nor solely for its

novelties, always an attractive feature to the young, but because it appealed to the sensibilities, excited emotions and touched the heart as no other purely instrumental compositions had ever done. And so it was that Beethoven also in his quality of composer soon gathered about him a circle of young disciples, enthusiastic admirers. Their homage may well have been grateful to him—as such is to every artist and scholar of genius, who, striking out and steadfastly pursuing a new path, subjects himself to the sharp animadversions of critics who, in all honesty, really can see little or nothing of good in that which is not to be measured and judged by old standards. The voice of praise under such circumstances is doubly pleasing. It is known that, when Beethoven's works began to find a just appreciation from a new generation of critics, who had indeed been schooled by them, he collected and preserved a considerable number of laudatory articles, whose fate cannot now be traced. When, however, the natural and just satisfaction which is afforded by the homage of honest admirers and deservedly eulogistic criticism, degenerates into a love of indiscriminate praise and flattery, it becomes a weakness, a fault. Of this error in Beethoven there are traces easily discernible, and especially in his later years; there are pages of fulsome eulogy addressed to him in the Conversation Books, which would make the reader blush for him, did not the mere fact that such books existed remind him of the bitterness of the composer's lot. The failing was also sometimes his misfortune; for those who were most profuse in their flatteries, and thus gained his ear, were by no means the best of his counsellors. But aside from the attractive force of his genius, Beethoven possessed a personal magnetism, which attached his young worshippers to him and, all things considered, to his solid and lasting benefit in his private affairs. Just at this time, and for some years to come, his brothers usually rendered him the aid he needed; but thenceforth to the close of his life, the names of a constant succession of young men will appear in and vanish from our narrative, who were ever necessary to him and ever ready at his call with their voluntary services.

Beethoven's love of nature was already a marked trait of his character. This was indulged and strengthened by long rambles upon the lofty hills and in the exquisitely beautiful valleys which render the environs of Vienna to the north and west so charming. Hence, when he left the city to spend the hot summer months in the country, with but an exception or two in a long series of years, his residence was selected with a view to the in-

dulgence of this noble passion. Hence, too, his great delight in the once celebrated work of Christian Sturm: "*Beobachtungen über die Werke Gottes*," which, however absurd much of its natural philosophy (in the old editions) appears now in the light of advanced knowledge, was then by far the best manual of popular scientific truth, and was unsurpassed in fitness to awaken and foster a taste for, and the understanding of, the beauties of nature. Schindler has recorded the master's life-long study and admiration of this book. It was one which cherished his veneration for the Creator and Preserver of the universe, and yet left his contempt for procrustean religious systems and ecclesiastical dogmas its free course. "To him, who, in the love of Nature, holds communion with her visible forms, she speaks a various language," says Bryant. Her language was thoroughly well understood by Beethoven; and when, in sorrow and affliction, his art, his Plutarch, his "*Odyssey*," proved to be resources too feeble for his comfort, he went to Nature for solace, and rarely failed to find it.

Art has been so often disgraced by the bad morals and shameless lives of its votaries, that it is doubly gratifying to be able to affirm of Beethoven that, like Handel, Bach and Mozart, he did honor to his profession by his personal character and habits. Although irregular, still he was as simple and temperate in eating and drinking as was possible in the state of society in which he lived. That he was no inordinate lover of wine or strong drinks is certain. No allusion is remembered in any of his letters, notes, memoranda, nor in the Conversation Books, which indicates a liking for any game of chance or skill. He does not appear to have known one playing-card from another. Music, books, conversation with men and women of taste and intelligence, dancing, according to Ries (who adds that he could never learn to dance in time—but Beethoven's dancing days were soon over—), and, above all, his long walks, were his amusements and recreations. His whim for riding was of short duration—at all events, the last allusion to any horse owned by him is in the anecdote on a previous page.

One rather delicate point demands a word: and surely, what Franklin in his autobiography could confess of himself, and Lockhart mention without scruple of Walter Scott, his father-in-law, need not be here suppressed. Nor can it well be, since a false assumption on the point has been made the basis already of a considerable quantity of fine writing, and employed to explain certain facts relative to Beethoven's compositions. Spending

his whole life in a state of society in which the vow of celibacy was by no means a vow of chastity; in which the parentage of a cardinal's or archbishop's children was neither a secret nor a disgrace; in which the illegitimate offspring of princes and magnates were proud of their descent and formed upon it well-grounded hopes of advancement and success in life; in which the moderate gratification of the sexual was no more discountenanced than the satisfying of any other natural appetite—it is nonsense to suppose, that, under such circumstances, Beethoven could have puritanic scruples on that point. Those who have had occasion and opportunity to ascertain the facts, know that he had not, and are also aware that he did not always escape the common penalties of transgressing the laws of strict purity. But he had too much dignity of character ever to take part in scenes of low debauchery, or even when still young to descend to the familiar jesting once so common between tavern girls and the guests. Thus, as the elder Simrock related, upon the journey to Mergentheim recorded in the earlier pages of this work, it happened at some place where the company dined, that some of the young men prompted the waiting-girl to play off her charms upon Beethoven. He received her advances and familiarities with repellent coldness; and as she, encouraged by the others, still persevered, he lost his patience, and put an end to her importunities by a smart box on the ear.

The practice, not uncommon in his time, of living with an unmarried woman as a wife, was always abhorrent to him—how much so, a sad story will hereafter illustrate; to a still greater degree an intrigue with the wife of another man. In his later years he so broke off his once familiar intercourse with a distinguished composer and conductor of Vienna, as hardly to return his greetings with common politeness. Schindler affirmed that the only reason for this was that the man in question had taken to his bed and board the wife of another.

The names of two married women might be here given, to whom at a later period Beethoven was warmly attached; names which happily have hitherto escaped the eyes of literary scavengers, and are therefore here suppressed. Certain of his friends used to joke him about these ladies, and it is certain that he rather enjoyed their jests even when the insinuations, that his affection was beyond the limit of the Platonic, were somewhat broad; but careful enquiry has failed to elicit any evidence that even in these cases he proved unfaithful to his principles. A story related by Jahn is also to the point, viz.: that Beethoven only by the urgent

solicitations of the Czerny family was after much refusal persuaded to extemporize in the presence of a certain Madame Hofdemel. She was the widow of a man who had attempted her life and then committed suicide; and the refusal of Beethoven to play before her arose from his having the general belief at the time, that a too great intimacy had existed between her and Mozart. Jahn, it may be observed, has recently had the great satisfaction of being able to prove the innocence of Mozart in this matter and of rescuing his memory from the only dark shadow which rested upon it. This much on this topic it has been deemed necessary to say here, not only for the reason above given, but to put an end to long-prevailing misconceptions and misconstructions of passages in Beethoven's letters and private memoranda and to save farther comment when they shall be introduced hereafter.